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AUTHOR Cash, R. William
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of a randomly selected standing poll panel implemented at Saint Mary's College at Notre Dame, Indiana, called PRISM (Prompt Response to Improve Saint Mary's). PRISM is designed to quickly ascertain the attitudes and opinions of a panel of 120 college students. Sample topics of PRISM surveys have included campus communication, residence life, and safety and security issues. Student replies to PRISM questionnaires are considered confidential and are reported only in the aggregate. The paper discusses the development of the program and analyzes the results after three semesters of operation. Procedures for quickly constructing a survey, obtaining responses, and processing results are described. Results are provided to the senior officer group and to the appropriate administrative entity usually within 2 weeks of the survey's administration. Program evaluation results are presented, indicating that both college administrators and students appreciated the opportunity to utilize the panel as one of several methods of student-college communication. Recommendations for program improvement are offered. (GLR)

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USING A STANDING POLL PANEL
TO MONITOR THE PULSE OF THE CAMPUS

R. William Cash
Director
Office of Institutional Research
Saint Mary's College
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556
(219) 284-4574

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Jean Endo
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**USING A STANDING POLL PANEL
TO MONITOR THE PULSE OF THE CAMPUS**

ABSTRACT

In an effort to quickly ascertain the attitudes and opinions of its students, a randomly-selected standing poll panel, **PRISM** (Prompt Response to Improve Saint Mary's), was established. The author describes the procedure used to establish and utilize **PRISM** for a variety of purposes and an analysis of the results after three semesters of operation. Feedback from the administrators who benefitted from the student opinion information and from the panel members validates the reasons for establishing the panel, demonstrates how the information was used, and provides evidence of the students' perception of the program. Recommendations based on this experience are made for those considering a similar process on their campus.

USING A STANDING POLL PANEL TO MONITOR THE PULSE OF THE CAMPUS

Introduction

College administrators have often sought ways by which they could quickly determine the attitudes and opinions of their students, particularly on issues which could be or are affected by administrative decisions. Alexander Astin (1985) suggests

Students' satisfaction with the institution's program is one of the most important indicators of an institution's effectiveness. Students should be asked about their satisfaction with more specific matters: the quality of teaching, advising, curriculum, facilities, extracurricular activities, and various student services. (p. 170)

Boyer (1987) noted that "the role of students in campus decision-making is not taken seriously in higher education" (p. 235).

They cannot be expected to feel loyalty to a college where they are not seriously consulted in matters that affect their lives. . . . In our national survey, we asked students about the role they feel they should play in college decisions. We learned that most undergraduates want a limited, informal role in matters related to faculty promotion and student admissions. They see themselves playing a far more formal role in student discipline and residence hall regulation. . . . We . . . recommend . . . that undergraduates be more fully consulted in the full range of campus life. (pp. 244-248)

In recognition of the changes which have occurred in higher education during the past few decades, Mary Wilders (1987) suggests administrators need to increase their demand for reliable, projectable educational data (p. 36).

There are occasions when the establishment of policies, practices, or procedures might be affected if there were a way to gauge student reaction to proposed changes. Having a method by which students could be quickly and accurately polled would be beneficial in these situations.

This paper describes how a student opinion poll was established and utilized on a relatively small residential college. The discussion includes suggestions for setting up a standing poll panel, will describe some of the incidents encountered in establishing and utilizing the panel, and provide feedback from administrators and students who have participated to date. In so doing, it is hoped that other institutional researchers will benefit from the presenter's experience.

Methodology

The seed for this program was planted by Greg Markovich at a Noel/Levitz software demonstration workshop. In his presentation on the need for student feedback in order to have additional information on why students persist or withdraw, Markovich encouraged the collection of information from students—"they really know" what is happening on campus. He specifically cited the suggestion of a leading higher education administration theorist who wondered why college presidents did not apply the "Gallup Poll" practice to their setting, particularly in view of its apparent utility in quickly gathering student feedback on issues of

current pertinence.

In view of the apparent willingness of the women at Saint Mary's College to participate in student surveys (participation rates often exceed 50%), and the fact that a representative panel would not be unduly large, the concept of the standing poll panel was presented to the College's senior officers for adoption.

A panel of 120 students was initially selected early to be the **PRISM** panel in the second semester of the 1990-91 school year, stratifying on class standing and residence hall (using off-campus residence as one residence group). This size was selected because it was small enough to manage, and was large enough to provide an overall confidence interval of $\pm 4.5\%$ if everyone responded ($\pm 5\%$ for 90 respondents and $\pm 6\%$ for 75 respondents, based on population of 1800 and pq of .5). Goodness-of-fit checks of several demographic characteristics found **PRISM** to be representative of other possible groupings (e.g., major, home state, GPA).

A special town hall meeting with the college's senior officers was used to kick off the **PRISM** program, providing panel members with an opportunity to meet and question these administrators. The concept of the program was explained, with the assurance that the burden of participation would not be demanding to those selected. Single-topic surveys (usually one page in length) would be sent through the mail several times each term, but never more than two a month; each should take less than 20 minutes to complete, and participants would respond within a day of receiving the survey. Results of the surveys would (usually) be shared with program participants. The institutional research office was designated as the agent for implementing the program.

Participants were told that while their responses would (usually) not be anonymous, the replies would be considered confidential and would be reported only in the aggregation. Identification numbers would be used to tie responses to demographic information kept in a parallel database, as a means to shorten the surveys and to avoid having to ask each time for such information as class standing, residence, home state, etc. Team members were assured they could remove (by tearing off the corner where the number was written) any identification if they wished to be anonymous; further, any survey seeking sensitive information (ie. sexual preference) would be conducted completely anonymously without any identification.

It was suggested that some topics might be too sensitive to report publicly; these would probably also be the topics (e.g., use of counseling services, participation in illegal activities, or reports of sexual activity and/or preference) that might be surveyed anonymously. Although any campus group (student, faculty, or administrative) could suggest topics for use with *PRISM*, the final approval of the topic and survey instrument was left to the senior officer group.

This town hall meeting drew 58 participants; several others returned their regrets, indicating that they had class or other schedule conflicts at the time. The students present utilized the opportunity to engage in open and frank discussion on a number of topics with the senior officers, and they suggested a number of possible survey topics for *PRISM*.

As the 1991-92 school year began, many of the participants from the previous year anxiously inquired whether or not the program would be continued. Replacements were randomly selected (still keeping the stratified cells proportional to the population) for previous

participants who were on leave (primarily international study programs abroad), who had withdrawn, or who had graduated, and the program was continued as before.

The surveys are all similar in appearance (see samples in Appendix), and all communication with **PRISM** members regarding the panel is identified with a distinctive **PRISM** logo. Initially, the code number was handwritten in an upper corner. A name and address merge file is created each term, including the code number, to facilitate communication with team members.

When members complained about the waste of paper (#10 envelope, a full 8x10 sheet of paper for the survey, and a #9 return envelope), a change was made to print name/address information and a return address on the back of the survey form, with instructions to fold the form with the return address visible, staple/tape, and drop in a campus mail deposit.

With this development, the use of the code numbers has not been necessary, since the respondents' names are printed on the back of the survey instrument. The exception is the off-campus students, who still receive separate survey and return envelopes.

The procedure for each survey involves developing an instrument, sending out the surveys, entering the data (quantitative and qualitative), analysis of the data, and dissemination of the results.

The survey is usually developed in conjunction with the administrative team most directly related to the topic being surveyed; once this is complete, it is presented to the senior officer group (who meet weekly) for fine-tuning and approval. At times, this step is repeated or extended, depending on the priority of the officers.

Once the survey is duplicated, preparing the mailing usually takes less than an hour.

The merge file is in mail box number order within each residence hall, facilitating the mailroom's delivery. The forms are returned either by hand (the Institutional Research office is centrally located on campus) or through campus mail (off-campus students use a postpaid business reply envelope). Within 2 weeks of the initial mailing, responses are complete. Data entry begins with the receipt for the first few and is kept up-to-date daily. Since each survey is short, this is a brief process for the quantitative information. A template with identifying numbers and demographic information is set up at the start of each term, and is used as the basis for each survey's data file. The comments are compiled separately with appropriate identifying (usually class and residence) information for each respondent.

Quantitative results are processed using the TABLES options in SPSS-PC+. The output is polished using a word processor. Since the same basic batch program is used in this process, very little time (less than an hour for each survey) is necessary in setting up new parameters. This procedure also provides an opportunity to obtain preliminary results before all responses are returned. Preparation of the qualitative information depends on the amount of comments and the degree to which respondents expanded on their replies. For some surveys, the responses have been categorized and presented topically, while for others they have been presented by respondent category or simply in raw form.

The results have been provided to the senior officer group and to the appropriate administrative entity usually within two weeks of the survey's administration. A brief one-page quantitative summary of the previous survey, compiled by class and residence, is usually included in the next survey administration to *PRISM* members. Since this portion of the results is shared with students, the administration considers the information to be public and

would not be surprised to see it published in campus media; to this date, however, this has not occurred. Copies of these documents are kept on file in the institutional research office, and have been referred to later when appropriate.

Results

PRISM was utilized three times during its first semester (Spring 1990-91). Thus far in the 1991-92 year, *PRISM* has been used five times. The topics and response rates for these surveys are shown in Table 1. Response rates to the surveys has ranged between 38% and 71%. Normal response rates to surveys at Saint Mary's College, which routinely involve a reminder to non-respondents, are in the 50-60% range; hence, it was hoped that with the special attention given the selection and use of *PRISM*, that response rates approaching 90% would be realized. In retrospect, this hope was unrealistic. An effort was made to use the panel for focus group discussions near the end of the first year, but this event did not draw well due to scheduling conflicts.

In addition to the occasions noted on Table 1, three uses of the *PRISM* panel were not directly in keeping with the original mission of the project. During the 1990-92 school years, Saint Mary's was a recipient of a FIPSE grant to promote the development of intellectual leadership. A part of the program evaluation involved the comparison of program non-participants with program participants. Since the identity of the program participants was known to program administrators, the *PRISM* panel was used to identify a random subset of students who were non-participants. One survey in 1990-91 and two surveys in 1991-92 related to this project. The third irregular use of the *PRISM* was a brief evaluation of the

Table 1 - Response rates to *PRISM* surveys, 1991-1993

Topic	Total	-----Class Standing-----				-----Campus Residence-----					
		Fresh men	Soph more	Junior	Senior	Off Campus	Augu sta	Holy Cross	Le Mans	McCand less	Reg ina
Campus Communication Survey	70.8	65.6	66.7	79.4	66.7	57.1		72.0	86.5	81.0	50.0
Residence Life Survey	61.7	65.6	51.5	64.3	66.7	57.1		72.0	67.6	71.4	40.0
Safety/Security Survey	51.7	36.7	58.6	53.6	57.6	52.9	83.3	48.1	60.5	42.1	30.8
Student Opinion Survey ¹	38.3	16.7	44.8	35.7	39.4	37.5	66.7	38.5	41.7	21.1	28.6
M.I.N.T. ² Survey	44.2	23.3	41.4	53.6	57.6	52.6	66.7	42.3	50.0	31.6	28.6

¹Opinions were sought regarding retention issues.

²Evaluation of visibility of Minority, International, and Non-Traditional student office and programming

program to provide student feedback for this paper.

Student feedback regarding *PRISM* has come in two forms. First is the anecdotal evidence, such as the already mentioned student inquiries at the beginning of the second year as to whether or not the program would be continued. An interview with the college president in the campus newspaper mentioned the use of *PRISM* to gather student opinion. Informal contacts with many of the students on campus indicate if they are not a member of the panel, they have friends who are involved. One of the winning student government candidates this past spring even listed membership on the panel as one of her present involvements in student leadership. A roommate of a *PRISM* member mentioned the idea to her father, who is an administrator at a large public university; he in turn has promoted the concept for implementation on his campus.

Over a fourth (26.6%) of the *PRISM* members took time during the busy mid-term period just prior to Spring Break this spring to respond to a brief evaluative survey of the program. The survey asked them to express their feelings about the poll's concept—"to

provide students with the opportunity to share their opinions and attitudes with the administration on issues of importance to the College". Further, members reacted to the practice of sharing the results with the panel, suggested future topics for the panel to address, and indicated the reason why they had **not** responded to some surveys.

In general, these respondents were very pleased with the **PRISM** concept. Following are a sample of their comments:

I believe that PRISM has been effective in sharing student opinions with administration. I also believe it is a necessity for the administration to be aware of student input. (Senior)

I think PRISM is a great idea. It's very important for the college to understand what the students think and why they hold the opinions they do. (Junior)

I think it is the quickest and best way for the administration to hear the voice of the students of Saint Mary's College on issues of importance. (Senior)

I feel very strongly about PRISM. It is very important that the college take the opinions of the students seriously. If Saint Mary's is to be in existence for future generations, the college needs to act on the opinions and concerns of the students. (Sophomore)

I think this is a great concept. So often administrators make decisions which are vital to the students lives. With the PRISM concept, the administrators at least know how the students feel. (Senior)

I believe it is important to convey to students that their opinions do matter and by expressing those opinions to administration only then will changes happen. PRISM reflects the questions and concerns of the administration and shows the students that there are dedicated administrators who care about campus issues. (Junior)

I think that it is a necessity for the College to receive feedback from its students in order to continue to improve the campus. This program has made me feel like my opinions have an effect on the decisions and policies of this campus. (Sophomore)

There were also comments suggesting that the program had not yet reached its full potential, and that students were still skeptical about its effectiveness:

I feel the concept as a whole is good idea, but here at Saint Mary's, it is still in the early stages. The topics we have covered have mainly been awareness of different organizations on campus. I believe that for PRISM to truly be effective, it should address the issues that are pressing (facing) us at the moment. (Sophomore)

In particular, the **PRISM** members appreciated the practice of sharing the results with them, as noted in the following sampling of comments:

I feel sharing the results is essential as a means of feedback, so that the students know they are taken seriously. (Senior)

It is nice to know where everyone stands - to see if change needs to occur or if the majority agrees on a subject. (Sophomore)

That's a nice extra bonus - after turning in Survey I always wonder what the results will be - its important to see them. It also shows us that the results were compiled to be used in the future. (Senior)

I think that it is a must. If the members are willing to share their ideas, they should be able to see the results. (Senior)

There were suggestions made to share the results with the entire campus and to report back to the students any administrative action taken as a result of the survey. One respondent suggested that it would not be necessary to send back the results each time, but to have them available upon request to those who are interested.

A wide range of topics were suggested for future consideration, ranging from the common areas of campus dissatisfaction (i.e. residence regulations, quality of food, parking problems) to deeper areas of concern (i.e. adjustment to a women's college, interaction with the University of Notre Dame, quality of intellectual life, reasons for transfer/withdrawal). These were shared with the College administration.

The questionnaire also asked why participants had not responded to some surveys. Over half of the respondents checked "Forgot to return survey." The possibility that the topic was not important or that they had not had the time was mentioned by a few respondents; the remaining ones noted that they had always responded.

College administrators also were queried about their evaluation of the program. The feedback was positive, with comments such as "The concept is great" and "This program is excellent". The dean of students noted that this method gives students an opportunity to comment without peer pressure, "so they can express how they really feel." Both the dean

and director of residence life noted that the results from the Residence Life Survey confirmed their own informal feedback and provided verification that recent changes in residence life were "on the right track."

Concern was expressed by several administrators that the surveys might create unrealistic expectation that change could or would take place—often there are fiscal and legal constraints that make this impossible. Another concern was that this process was still just obtaining information from the vocal students and might not represent the entire campus.

These administrators could point to specific actions which had taken place as a result of these surveys. Funds have been appropriated for the "information kiosks" the students requested in the Campus Communication Survey and various capital projects for the coming fiscal year were suggested or validated through various *PRISM* surveys. The results from the Residence Life Survey were used to assist the student Residence Hall Association in setting their goals.

Since one of the student members of the panel had suggested earlier that it would be appropriate to repeat some of the surveys periodically, administrators were specifically asked how they would react to this suggestion. Without any reservation, every administrator who assisted in this evaluation thought this would be appropriate, although not necessarily so for every topic. It was also noted that some adjustments might need to be made to reflect changes that have occurred in procedures, personnel, and perceived student attitudes.

The administrators also provided some suggestions for other topics which could be covered in the future. Among the suggestions was one for a periodic "social conscience" and/or current events survey, that might give the College some perception of changes in

student opinion and attitudes over time.

Other evaluative feedback regarding *PRISM* came from a study group formed to study the College's institutional research function, as a part of the College's long-range planning process. The study group lauded the practice of polling students through *PRISM*, and wondered if the procedure could be extended to include faculty, administrators, and service staff.

The main problems that appear at this point are potentially misleading expectations that result from public awareness of administrative interest in a given topic and the relatively and increasingly low response rates to the surveys. Since the latter problem may be related to participants "forgetting" to return surveys, there may be a need to develop some mechanism for prompting non-respondents to "remember."

Recommendations

After a year-and-a-half of utilizing the *PRISM* panel, this institutional researcher is convinced of the benefits of having such a function at the College. As the program continues, there are some recommendations which he will give the officers overseeing the project.

First, students will continue to participate only as long as they see results for their effort. Hence, administrators will need to be prepared to share with all the students (through the campus media) what the results were to each survey, but also what are the actions which are being considered as a consequence. The program may work well for a year or two without visible results, but it will be perceived as an empty ploy if there are no results.

Second, for the panel to be considered effective, it is crucial for greater proportions of students to respond; otherwise, administrators are likely to suspect that the results are not representative of the entire campus, but merely reflect the opinions of the vocal few. Participants will be encouraged to respond more regularly and more promptly. This will be easier if the first recommendation is realized, and if there becomes a tradition of truly using *PRISM* to improve all aspects of college life at Saint Mary's.

Third, there should be greater utilization of the panel; five surveys in three semesters (plus three other non-opinion surveys) probably does not provide enough visibility for the project. Some of the suggestions made for future surveys, including a repetitive "social conscience" survey, might be considered.

Fourth, the College should consider broadening the concept to establishing similar panels of faculty, administrators, and staff when it is necessary to ascertain the pulse of the entire campus.

There are areas of further study which might contribute to future changes in *PRISM*. One might be consideration given to conducting poll research in a more typical manner—by telephone. While this would increase response rates and would probably be more successful in eliciting information from those less likely to respond to a printed survey, it would be difficult to contact quickly any group of students using the telephone. The presenter has considered convening small groups of the panel for "focus group" and social purposes, but has been discouraged from doing so by the Institutional Research Study Group because doing so might be construed by some to be personally "influencing" the panel and keeping it from being somewhat faceless and anonymous.

Conclusions

College administrators and students both appreciate the opportunity to utilize the panel as one of several methods of student-college communication. Of particular benefit is the opportunity to ascertain the opinion of those students who are not usually heard--those students who are not typically campus leaders and opinion-shapers.

The panel conveys to the students that indeed the administration is interested in the students' attitudes and opinions and is willing to mold policy, practices, and procedures in a manner sensitive to the students. The concept will be most successful where this indeed is the case.

On this particular campus, the standing poll panel has been shown to be a useful administrative tool; the program has merit for virtually any higher education setting. Institutional researchers interested in facilitating such a program would benefit from the ideas, methods, and results found in this paper.

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